

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom deplores the fact that, as part of its recently declared state of emergency and suspension of the Constitution and among the many ensuing detentions, the government of General Pervez Musharraf has placed Asma Jahangir, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion or Belief, under house arrest. The Commission calls on the U.S. government, at the highest levels, to protest Ms. Jahangir's detention and to urge the government of Pakistan to release her immediately so that she may continue her important work as Special Rapporteur.

The Special Rapporteur is the independent expert who investigates and reports to the UN on violations of the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief around the world. Since its creation in 1986, the mandate of the Special Rapporteur has been an important tool in the international protection of this fundamental freedom. Ms. Jahangir, a Pakistani lawyer and human rights defender, has held this mandate since 2004. Ms. Jahangir's sister and fellow lawyer and human rights advocate, Hina Jilani, is also an independent UN human rights expert and reportedly is also the target of an arrest warrant.

The detention order asserts, without providing specifics, that Ms. Jahangir's exercise of her rights of association and expression have been found "prejudicial to public safety and maintenance of public order," and orders that she be arrested and confined to her residence in Lahore for 90 days.

"By placing Asma Jahangir under house arrest, the government of Pakistan not only appears to be violating her individual human rights, but also is interfering with her ability, as a UN Special Rapporteur, to protect and promote the human rights of others," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie. Over the next three months, the Special Rapporteur had been scheduled to visit Angola and Israel to examine the situation with respect to the freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief in those countries. Later in 2008, she is scheduled to go to India and Turkmenistan; Bangladesh, China, and Iran have agreed in principle to allow her to visit. She has already visited and reported on such countries as Nigeria, Sri Lanka, and Azerbaijan.

As one of the members of the UN Human Rights Council, the UN body to which the independent human rights experts report, Pakistan is supposed to “uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights,” according to the UN General Assembly resolution that created the Council. “Suspending the Constitution, restricting the media, and arresting judges, lawyers, political party officials, civil society representatives and UN human rights experts hardly seems appropriate for a Human Rights Council member,” Cromartie said.

The Commission, an independent, bipartisan federal body, has long raised concerns about the ways in which the Pakistani government severely violates the internationally guaranteed right to religious freedom inside Pakistan. Abuses include the country's blasphemy laws, which commonly involve false accusations and result in the lengthy detention of and violence against Ahmadis, Christians, Hindus, and Muslims on account of their religious beliefs; the laws violating the fundamental rights of the Ahmadi community; the persistent sectarian violence targeting Shi'as, Ahmadis, Hindus, and Christians; and the Hudood ordinances, which violate the rights of women in Pakistan.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Michael Cromartie

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